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Mrs Jo Griffin
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Griffin

Short inspection of Towcester Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 31 October 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since your predecessor school was judged to be good in October 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since the transition to a new leadership team in September 2017, you have ensured that leaders communicate a clear vision for bringing about continuous improvement. High expectations and aspirations for pupils are clear and are reflected in the school's long-term priorities. Leaders' day-to-day work promotes the school's strong sense of community. You and the rest of the leadership team have established an inclusive school environment that is welcoming to everyone.

Pupils have only good things to say about the school. Their enjoyment is evident in their high rates of attendance. Pupils are kind to each other, courteous to adults and proud to share their learning experiences with visitors. They enjoy celebrating their own and each other's successes. Pupils say adults listen to them and value their opinion. As one pupil explained, adults 'treat us all respectfully'. Parents and carers are equally positive. They are very complimentary of the school's leadership and they value the frequent opportunities to discuss any issues with teachers. One parent stated simply, 'My child loves coming to school every day.'

Leaders have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and are far from complacent. They readily highlight areas of weaknesses; for example, they know pupils did not achieve well enough in the Year 1 phonics screening check in 2018. Leaders' plans for improvement are well structured and focus on securing good progress for all pupils, particularly with their reading. With the support of senior leaders, middle leaders are increasingly skilled at monitoring their areas of

responsibility and providing teachers with appropriate support to improve their practice. Staff are overwhelmingly positive about working at the school. They say the school is well led and they feel motivated, supported and respected.

Leaders plan an engaging curriculum that draws on pupils' interests. Pupils enjoy learning different topics, such as 'How do we hear?' or 'Tragic Titanic'. Leaders enrich pupils' learning effectively with a range of outdoor experiences and visits. Similarly, leaders ensure that spiritual, moral, social and cultural themes permeate the curriculum, underpinned by the school's distinctive values. For example, during an assembly I observed, pupils reflected on how they could be generous with their time to help others. Pupils appreciate people who come from a diverse range of cultures and faiths. For instance, during the inspection Year 1 pupils were learning about Diwali, while ongoing links with European schools help pupils to appreciate different ways of life. Pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain.

Pupils are eager workers and behave well. They listen carefully, follow instructions and try their best. Pupils say teachers implement the school's 'good to be green' behaviour policy consistently and fairly. Pupils are keen to contribute to the school. They enjoy leadership responsibilities, including being a member of the 'sports crew' or arranging for members of the local community to join in with school activities. Pupils know the importance of being fit and healthy. Older pupils readily complete the mile-a-day challenge and they have all been trained in basic first aid. These opportunities successfully promote pupils' personal development and welfare.

The governing body is well informed. Governors are committed to carrying out their roles well, striking a balance between providing leaders with both challenge and support. Members of the governing body visit school regularly to discuss leaders' plans for improvement. They know the school's strengths; however, governors do not have a detailed understanding of how you spend additional government funding for disadvantaged pupils. Support from trust leaders has improved the consistency of teaching and ensured that pupils' progress is assessed accurately. Recently, trust leaders have checked that leaders' systems to identify pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities are precise.

Teachers regularly work closely with a 'buddy' to observe pupils' learning in each other's classrooms and share successful teaching strategies. This has helped them to reflect on, and improve, their own professional practice. Due to the success of these partnerships, teachers say they have a better understanding of work taking place in different areas of the school and feel able to contribute more effectively.

Teachers provide pupils with frequent opportunities to write at length across a range of subjects. When we reviewed pupils' workbooks, they revealed noticeable improvements in both the quality and the quantity of pupils' written work, including a recent focus on increasing the detail in pupils' science explanations. In 2018, Year 2 and Year 6 pupils' attainment in writing was consistently above the national average, according to provisional information. Current pupils are making good progress with their writing.

Pupils understand that teachers expect the same high standards throughout their work. Teachers set improvement targets for pupils, in line with school policy, which pupils use to help them make better progress. Pupils enjoy taking responsibility for their own learning, for example routinely editing their own and each other's work and using 'working walls' in each classroom for support. Pupils with whom I spoke explained how they pick more demanding tasks that will allow them to meet their targets.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. All staff, and those responsible for governance, understand their responsibilities for keeping pupils safe in school, at home and beyond. Leaders are well trained and regularly provide staff with relevant safeguarding updates. Staff know how to spot the signs of a pupil who may be at risk and act promptly to make a referral. The recent appointment of a family support worker ensures that pupils requiring additional help are provided for well, including through external agencies.

Pupils feel safe in school. Teachers consider with pupils how to reduce possible risks they may face, including online. For instance, Year 3 pupils discuss not sharing photos with others and Year 5 explore 'internet deceivers'. Leaders host well-attended workshops for parents to learn how to keep their children safe online.

Pupils, parents and staff are clear that bullying is not an issue in school. On the rare occasions when it does happen, pupils are confident any adult would resolve their concerns promptly. Pupils know 'The Den' is available at lunchtime as a safe space they can visit if they have any concerns. The vast majority of parents say their children are happy and safe in school, and well looked after.

Inspection findings

- The proportion of pupils in Year 1 who achieved the expected standard in the phonics screening check fell below the national average in 2018. Leaders have introduced a new system for teaching phonics and provide adults with support and training to improve their practice. They are beginning to monitor lessons more closely to ensure that pupils are being accurately assessed and their needs are being met. When we observed pupils' learning in phonics, pupils used well-established routines to practise identifying letters and blending sounds. However, inconsistencies in the quality of the teaching of phonics remain.
- In 2018, Year 6 pupils' progress in reading declined. Provisional national information suggests that progress is below average. Leaders acted swiftly to ascertain why this occurred and have begun to take effective action to ensure that weaknesses identified are resolved. Teachers challenge pupils in Years 5 and 6 to read books of different genres. All older pupils support younger pupils with their reading each week, building pupils' confidence and reinforcing the value of being able to read with ease. Pupils read accurately and used their phonic skills to decipher more-challenging words. The school is developing a culture of reading. Pupils enjoy choosing books from the library and sharing their learning

with the librarian.

- Teachers provide frequent opportunities for pupils to enjoy storytelling and class novels. Pupils have explicit opportunities to practise their skills of inference and summarising when completing reading comprehensions. Evidence seen in pupils' workbooks suggests that this is beginning to have an impact on the depth of their understanding. However, while current pupils are making better progress with their reading, this is not yet consistently strong across all year groups.
- In 2018, disadvantaged pupils in Year 6 did not make the progress expected of them, particularly in reading and mathematics. Too few disadvantaged pupils achieved the higher standards, compared with national averages. Previously, leaders have not identified the barriers to learning for these pupils adequately or evaluated the strategies used to support these pupils thoroughly. Neither governors nor trust leaders hold leaders rigorously to account for the impact of additional funding on disadvantaged pupils' outcomes.
- Recently, leaders have begun to monitor strategies used to support each disadvantaged pupil's needs more closely. Leaders regularly hold teachers to account for these pupils' outcomes through pupil progress meetings. Due to this more focused approach, the progress made by current disadvantaged pupils from their starting points has improved. Increased proportions of these pupils are achieving the higher standards in reading, writing and mathematics.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- an increased proportion of pupils achieve the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check
- they continue to develop strategies to improve pupils' reading, so pupils make stronger progress and an increased proportion achieve the higher standards
- extra funding for disadvantaged pupils is monitored closely and the impact of its use is evaluated precisely in order to improve these pupils' outcomes.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Peterborough, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northamptonshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Tordoff
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and the deputy headteacher. I held meetings with leaders responsible for key stages 1 and 2, and the assistant headteacher, who is the coordinator for the provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities and is also responsible for the early years. I held a meeting with five members of the governing body, including the chair of the governing body. I also met with two representatives of the academy trust.

I visited seven classes, jointly with you, to observe pupils' learning. I also observed an assembly. I observed pupils' behaviour around the school and during lessons. I met with a group of pupils in Years 5 and 6 and talked with others I met in classes and around the school. I scrutinised a selection of pupils' workbooks with you and the deputy headteacher. I spoke with some parents as they brought their children to school in the morning.

I considered the 82 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including the 37 free-text comments. I also considered the 30 responses to the staff survey. I read a range of information, including the school's self-evaluation; the school's improvement plan; documents relating to safeguarding; information relating to pupils' attainment, progress and attendance, the school's use of the pupil premium funding; minutes of meetings of the governing body; a report of a visit carried out by the trust; and a selection of school policies.